

The Second Sunday in Lent  
March 12, 2017  
John 3:1-17

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### **Faith Basics**

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, by the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Here we are, at the Second Sunday in Lent, and at least earlier in the week wondering what became of winter and how amazing it is that spring is already showing signs of arrival.

The readings for this day leave me wondering too. When Lent more normally calls us to reflect upon the sinfulness of our lives and our world, here stand before us readings selected by our church that speak of fundamentals, of foundations. And these are not the disturbing fare of sin, sorrow, and contrition; they are, rather, of hope and love.

There was a long-held tradition of using these passages on the Fourth Sunday in Lent rather than the Second. The fourth, you see, would be the middle Sunday between Ash Wednesday and Easter; and at that mid-point the church chose to pause for refreshment. It was a feast of the Word in an otherwise arid time of fasting and meditation.

And so, we come early to a banquet of spiritual food during our Lenten fast:

- In the Old Testament lesson, Abram and Sarai respond to the calling of God that leads them to a new place and to becoming the foundational parents of many nations. Even Christians speak in biblical terms of being descended from Abraham and Sarah. You will note in the reading from Romans that Paul calls Abraham, "our ancestor according to the flesh".

- Then Paul uses the example of Abraham to speak of another foundation of our faith. That is simply that not works, but trust and faith in God are what are reckoned as righteousness. We Lutherans claim a special patent on that basic doctrine of the faith—the one we call "grace".

- And what could be more fundamental than that phrase from the gospel of John that is displayed at every athletic contest where television cameras might see—John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." We ought to raise Nicodemus to the status of "saint" if for no other reason than that his scholarly conversation with our Lord led Jesus to make this simple statement of his mission and message.

The faith that calls us to reflection during Lent is built upon these great foundations: a common and deeply historical heritage, an affirmation of God's unfathomable grace, and a recognition that God's intentions for the world stem from a righteous love for us and the world. These are well worth celebrating, even to the point of breaking our fast, whatever shape it may take for you this year.

In that spirit of celebration, let's not forget that Jesus does not end his statement to Nicodemus with John 3:16. He continues:

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (3:17)

There are those preachers who revel in the gift of Lent, taking undue delight in the opportunity to heap guilt upon their hearers. As one preacher has put it:

"Here is the preaching season par excellence, six weeks when we are given license to do what we would do all year if we could: breast-beating, belittling, berating. It's a time of sackcloth and ashes, the long fast, self-denial, focus upon sin and its consequences. Every preacher gets to play the prophet at Lent.

"And the beautiful part is, the people love it. 'You are the... ones whose culpability made the cross inevitable,' we preach. 'All like sheep have gone astray,' we cry, and the people in unison say, 'You really stepped on our toes today, preacher.' What a wonderful Lenten litany.

"At a worship workshop it was noted that the church traditionally forbade kneeling and prayers of confession during celebrative periods like Easter. The assembled clergy were shocked. 'Surely you're not implying that Easter or Christmas takes sin away,' said one. 'Confession should begin every Sunday service,' said another. After all, what's Sunday for if not to get those poor fools on their knees? Smoking, drinking, adultery, the arms race, sexism, racism—the list of Lenten preaching possibilities is limitless." (William Willimon, "God So Loved", Christian Century March 17, 1982, p. 292.)

But today, in the gloomy way toward the Passion, the gospel bids us to pause long enough to put the cross in proper context:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,... not... to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him .

God loved the world, loved so much that God gave. Not to condemn but to save, John says.

Not to condemn.

In the midst of our trivial moralizing, our scolding, and scrambling for a few

penitential brownie points, John reminds us why we're here. We're on the way of the cross not because of what we have done or left undone, but because of what God has done. The cross is not simply one more piece of damaging evidence that seals shut the case against guilty humanity. The goriest work of human sin gets sidetracked into glorious divine redemption. The prophet is sent not to scold but to save. It was out of love that he came among us and stood beside us and chided us and died with us, for us, and saved us. Love.

It was for this that we began the journey on Ash Wednesday. It was not for sackcloth and ashes, whips, the sacrifice of a before-dinner martini and empty stomachs that we're here. It was love that put us here. We kneel not as miserable worms but as those brought to their knees by sheer wonder at the gift. It was not to condemn us that our Lord bid us bear his cross, but to save us. We are not here as the lost, but as the found.

The cross is heavy and clouds gather, and we will have more days for honesty, more Sundays to examine our lives again and pray for the courage to be truthful about all the ways in which we betray so great a love. Lent is only beginning; there is still more repenting to be done. But as we turn our steps again in the direction of the climb toward Calvary, we may take these words with us, no matter what we might say on the other Sundays in Lent: it was not for condemnation that he was sent to us, but for love. He beckons us on, not to condemn but to save, to give life. (Willimon, adapted)

Truly, that is the message of the foundational readings today. Abram left his home to gain a new land and a new life. Jesus comes in love to offer life. And Nicodemus spurs Jesus to a confession of his hope that we all have new life, like unto a new birth: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." (3:3) Scripture portrays a God who embraces us from birth to death to life beyond, who bears us through our times of danger, pain, and struggle.

As people of hope, we believe passionately that death does not have the last word. Yet all around us—in Afghanistan, in Syria, in Iraq, in Somalia, in the real and self-imposed prisons of our nation, and in our hearts—we see the footprints of death. Who are we to dare proclaim, then, a God of life?

Listen to the words of a mother: "Never before did birth and death come together for me as they did recently, when I gave birth to my first child, at the same time a friend and coworker was experiencing a death in his family. Two experiences I had viewed as markedly different, I began to see as similar.

"The morning my son Luke was born, I held his tiny body and considered the journey he had taken in the last twenty-four hours. I tried to imagine that change as he experienced it—the inexorable pressure of muscles pushing him into some strange and completely unknown passage, his body at the mercy of larger forces bearing down on him.

"Overnight, his body and world were radically altered. He now must breathe air, not water. He has to use his mouth for nourishment, no longer relying on a connection to my body. In his sleep, he flails his hands through the air, startled not to hit the solid, comforting wall of my body. After living only in warm darkness, he experiences light, coolness, and the touch of other skin on his own. Nothing can prepare him for this new life which must be, quite simply, unimaginable.

"Had there been a companion watching my child's journey from the womb side, he would certainly have seen that process as death, not life. Only when viewed from this side do we recognize and name it as birth.

"The transformation my son has experienced can only be matched by that other great passage in our lives—our death. Death must be this same complete, unimaginable change of physical state. It, too, is an inexorable process that seizes us, and over which we have no control. Our only choice is to live into it.

"The day I experienced the initial signs of labor, I learned that the ninety-two-year-old grandmother of my coworker Doug had fallen, breaking her hip, wrist, and shoulder. Her fragile heart made the situation life-threatening.

"During the two weeks my son was learning the rhythms of this world, Doug and his family kept vigil with his grandmother, midwives in the transformative process of her moving from this life over that strange, unimagined threshold we call death. As Luke was learning to live, she was learning to die, held throughout by the arms of God.

"We see death from this side—and it is terrifying. But our faith allows us to claim the promise: What appears to be death is a portal to a life transformed.

"Unleashed, that faith becomes our fierce power in this world. People who have a vision grounded (in the foundation of) God's love and justice—and who do not fear death—can risk much in pursuit of a world reborn. People who trust in the God whose arms enfold us from birth to death—and beyond—are free to live boldly." (Dee Dee Risher, "The Other Side", Nov-Dec 1999, Vol. 35, No. 6)

Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. It was not for condemnation that Jesus was sent to us, but for love. He beckons us, not to condemn, but to save—to give life—from every point of view. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord unto abundant life. Amen.